



The fire is just one valley away, and coming with the wind, we just don't know quite when. But fires or not, we're cresting the back side of summer and now passing berry season; the year's berries must still be gathered, if we are to have huckleberry jam in the coming year, and pancakes and muffins and milkshakes, if we are to have huckleberries on our ice cream, if we are to prepare huckleberry glazes for the grilled breasts of wild duck and grouse.

Will the berries have the slight scent of wood smoke this year? I try to taste it as I sample them,

but can't; they still taste like huckleberries. Or perhaps everything is so saturated with the scent of smoke that I no longer notice any difference.

The valley is filling even fuller with smoke and heat, as if it is but a vessel for these things to be poured into it. I sit in the middle of a rich huckleberry patch and pluck berries contentedly, falling quickly into that daydreaming lull, the satisfied trance that seems to fill me, with its deeper echoes of older times, as if I am the vessel. And having wandered, luck-filled, into a place of bounty, I will do well to just sit here for a while,

pleasantly satisfied, daydreaming and harvesting, daydreaming and gathering; and no matter, really, that the valley might soon be burning down around me, for what can I do, really, even if it is?

I pick for about an hour, suspended in this lovely August grace before I discern the change coming. I can feel the drop in barometric pressure almost as violently as when a plane in flight bumps and sags suddenly, pitching plastic cups and playing cards to the floor in a clatter. The wind of a coming storm is not yet here, but I can see it, dark in the distance. I can see the wall of dust and smoke it is pushing ahead, like a piston; and up on my berry mountain, in that compressing dead-air space caught between the approaching storm and the mountain, I can feel the vacuum that is being created, and it is as unsettling a feeling, physically and emotionally and even spiritually, as was the berry-picking of only a few minutes ago fulfilling.

Next, then, I can hear the wind, as the advancing plume of it slides in over the air sandwiched below—the air in which I am still sitting, trying to pick huckleberries, trying to gather up the last of the summer's harvest—sensing or suspecting somehow that this might be my last leisure-day in the woods for a while, my last leisure-hour—and as that first-approaching upper tongue of wind slides in across the mountain, just above the mountain, it passes through the upper reaches of the Swiss-cheese excavations for all the many woodpeckers that have riddled the blackened, towering spars left over from the last fire, six years ago, and through the fire-gnawed Rorschach shapes, the strange gaps and apertures left in the husks of old tree trunks.

The result is a kind of music like none I have

ever heard before, somehow both somber and joyous, and intensely powerful, fueled by more wind than all the human lungs in the world could ever provide, and it is singing right here, right now, on this mountain, and I am in the center of it, and part of me is frightened and confused, and yet part of me is not frightened; and I keep picking berries, though now in the distance I can see tremendous bolts of lightning, and can hear the cannonade of thunder.

There is no rain. The air is as void of moisture as a laundered sheet taken crisp and hot from the dryer.

The wind is still above me, the lower waves have not quite yet come sweeping up the mountain, and up above, as the wind moans through those hollow burned-tree keyholes and pipeflutes, it bangs and rattles also against the taut hollow hides of the larger snags and spars, creating a deep drumming resonance to accompany all the strange organ-pipe howling, which from a distance sounds like a thousand calliopes playing for some demented, wonderful, terrifying circus—though right here where I am, beneath and amid the drumming and the howling, it sounds like tremendously amplified symphony music—a thousand of the world's largest chamber orchestras—and now the wind-beneath-the-wind is reaching me, splashing in over me like dry waves at the ocean—the wind coming so strong that

when I stand up, I can lean downhill into it without falling down, suspended like a hawk, or a heavy kite—and this lower wind is carrying pine needles and grit, which sting my face and arms and bare legs, and I have to turn my face to shield my eyes against them, and I know more than I have ever known that there is no hand of



mankind, no technology or science or knowledge, or management directives, that can influence in the least this expression of power, this breath of a living, restless earth: and again I feel tiny, puny, even invisible, and it is exhilarating, and I am reminded intensely of what an astounding privilege it is to be alive;



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of how rare the circumstances are that conspire to bring life.

I can see the lightning walking up the valley from the south, striding toward me, and I hurry down the mountain, through the stinging needles and grit. Entire tree limbs torn loose from the canopy float feathery, lichen-laden, through the sky. Entire treetops snap off occasionally and launch into the air a short distance, like failed rockets.

Farther down the mountain, I can hear still more tree trunks snapping, a sound like cannons. It seems to me that the earth beneath my feet is buzzing or trembling, and the sky is plum-colored now, but still there is no rain, only wind and fire, and boiling clouds of dust.

I hurry through the tangle of old blowdown, old fire-char and new berry-bush, new green saplings, running as a deer might, into the wind, hoping to weave my way unscathed through that maze of falling branches—and once I'm back at the truck, and driving down the logging road (hoping that no trees fall across the road: I have a little emergency bow saw in the back, but it would take a long time to cut through a tree with that), I'm disoriented by the way the entire forest around me seems to be waving like nothing more

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substantial than the undersea fronds of kelp or reed-grass; or like the thick hair on the back of an animal's back, pressing flat and then swirling in the wind.

What a revelation it is, to have one's perceptions—one's universe—so startlingly re-ordered, so corrected or amplified. The forests of immense trees are pow-

erful and awe-inspiring, but even they are tiny beneath these gusts of breath from a living, sometimes restless world.

And once I'm home, the girls and I go out onto the porch and watch the lichens and limbs continue to sail through the air, and gaze at the strangely glowing sky, a greenish hurricane-sky, and watch the streaks of lightning, and count, with thumping hearts, the number of seconds before we hear each crack of thunder... And still there is no rain, not even a little spit of it, and like a beggar or a miser or even a rich man gone broke, I find myself remembering the blizzard from last New Year's Eve, and the heavy wet late snows in April. I'm hoping that moisture has been retained to hold back some of the fire, even as I understand more clearly than ever that the fire must come, that it is no different from the wind or the snow itself—that it has shaped, and continues to shape, this landscape; that it is its own kind of season, and that the time for it has arrived; that in this regard it is as unstoppable as the wind or the rain.

It's simply, or not-so-simply, a part of the world out here; it helped make the world out here. How strange to think that the fire helped sculpt and create the very thing it occasionally consumes. What an amazing thing, to stand just out of harm's way, at the edge of the valley, and watch it pass through, as it always has, and always will. 🐾



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